The Fourth Church Pulpit

DINING WITH THE WRONG CROWD

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FOURTH
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Mark 2:13-17
". . . Why does he eat with tax collectors and sinners?"
Mark 2:16 (NRSV)

It was twenty years ago that we planned an adventure to visit my father-in-law's relatives in Ireland. No one, in this country, had ever seen them. No one had visited the family farm in Creeslough outside Letterkenney, on the northwest coast of the Republic, since his parents emigrated to the Untied States as young people sixty years before. We rented a car in Dublin and drove all day, north along the western coast. We weren't sure about the location. We had written, of course, and knew the name of the town and planned simply to ask about the location of the farm when we got there. The hour was late. The further north we drove, the fewer towns and people we saw and the more ruggedly beautiful the countryside became. We weren't sure when we would arrive and as we approached what was surely the last village before Letterkenney we decided to stop for something to eat — again not certain what was awaiting us, and whether or not there would be food: for me a question of no small significance. So we found a small restaurant and ate, heartily I recall, chicken, boiled potatoes and peas, lots of peas; proceeded with our journey and in less than an hour, after inquiring in Creeslough and discovering that our Midwest pronunciation of the family name was not decipherable to the locals, drove down a narrow, single track road and into a barnyard flanked by huge stacks of peat, and introduced ourselves to the Irish relatives: Aunt Cassie 75, Eliza 35, Thomas, James and Willie, ages 70 to 30, all single. Aunt Cassie was widowed; none of the rest had ever married. We were excited and a little nervous. They were not very comfortable either.

There were two rooms on the first floor, a kitchen and sitting room. We were shown immediately into the sitting room to a table which had been put there for us, elaborately set with dishes, cups, utensils and a lace tablecloth. The room obviously was seldom used. The relatives retired to the kitchen. There was a warm peat, or turf, fire in the fireplace and there we sat, alone, after our ten-hour journey, wondering what was going to happen next. What happened next was dinner — our second dinner in an hour. The relatives are poor: five of em farmed 40 acres of potatoes; they had four cows, a donkey and some chickens and enough peat to warm the little house. Other than a single cold water faucet in the kitchen there was no plumbing.

After a few minutes of solitary confinement in the sitting room, they emerged — the five of them, each carrying a full plate of hot food: chicken, boiled potatoes, baked beans, a small mountain of peas. We looked at each other in panic. We had eaten less than an hour ago! This was obviously a very important occasion. They had obviously killed a precious chicken and had been preparing for this moment for days. Declining to eat, even eating modestly was out of the question. The relatives had put the food in front of us and once again returned to the kitchen. I followed them this time and asked them to join us. They had already eaten, they said, so it was up to us. But they did return to sit in the chairs and watch us eat, which meant that we couldn't even stuff our pockets. Somehow we did it and survived. The story actually goes on. A few hours later when we came down the stairs in the morning, it happened all over again, the sitting room, fire, all five carrying plates of food — all the food from the night before, plus eggs and fish.

Three times a day it happened for our several day visit. The chicken, potatoes, baked beans — and the mountain of peas — which we finally reduced to a small pile. But we didn't eat peas again for a year.

Sitting at the table was an important socialization ritual. Eating was a way of establishing a relationship, a way of communicating, of speaking actually when verbalization was difficult and in some ways impossible. If we had any doubts regarding their feelings about us, our coming to visit, those doubts vanished in the clouds of steam from the heaping plates of chicken, potatoes, peas.

Listen to this from a book with the delightful title, *Consuming Passions; The Anthropology of Eating.*

> "In all societies, both simple and complex, eating is the primary way of initiating and maintaining human relationships. Once the anthropologist finds out where, when and with whom the food is eaten, just about everything else can be inferred about the relations among the society's members. To know what, when, how and where and with whom people eat is to know the character of their society."
> [see John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography*, p. 68]

That paragraph is cited by John Dominic Crossan, professor of biblical studies at DePaul University in his controversial book, *Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography.* Professor Crossan observes that cultural anthropologists use a word that was new for me — "commensality" — from the Latin word mensa — table. Anthropologists use that word to describe the way in any society the rules of tabling and eating are a miniature model of the rules for association and socialization in that society. [p. 68] Jesus, says Crossan, radically challenged his society's values by the simple act of practicing an open commensality — i.e. "Dining with the wrong crowd."

And so, there is a lot happening on that day when Jesus of Nazareth accepted a dinner invitation at the home of Levi the tax man and was joined at table by people everybody knew as sinners. That's not a personal moral judgment, by the way. These are people who for one reason or another did not keep the religious law and so were not allowed access to the Synagogue. They were outsiders in every sense of the word — society's cast-offs, expendable people.

On the Sundays before Easter we are joining an old, old venture — to know what we can about the central figure of our faith. The Quest of the Historical Jesus, it used to be called. And while Christianity is essentially a matter of following Jesus, regardless of what we know, or think we know about him, we Presbyterians have always wanted our faith to be enriched by understanding. "Sir, we wish to see Jesus," a man said to the disciple Andrew one time. He must have been a Presbyterian. We want to see and know and understand all we can. And so we are looking carefully at scenes in the story of Jesus as it is told in the oldest account, the first to be written, The Gospel According to Mark.

When we do that, when we use the analytical processes of the historian, it is apparent that we can't know very much. No one took pictures, or notes. No one even drew a picture of him. He left no writing. Scholars are not sure he could read or write. It wasn't until a full generation had passed that someone thought to write an account of his three-year ministry.

What we end up doing, of course, is trying to discern the meaning of each incident, and why the author remembered and recorded it. We try to understand the situations, the nuances, the impact his life had on his society. We end up looking very closely at the choices he made: his concerns, his passions and priorities.

The way Mark tells the story, one of Jesus' major passions, perhaps the major concern, was the Kingdom of God. Jesus talked persistently about the Kingdom of God, not as a place, a geographical unit but a state of being. He announced its presence: said it was near, hidden sometimes in the life of the world, but always present. It was not a place - but God's reign — a state in which God's will was operational. The Kingdom of God, according to Jesus, is the way things would be in the world if God were in charge. (Crossan) Jesus taught it, described it in his parables and he lived as if God were actually in charge. He summoned men and women to live in the world as citizens of God's Kingdom.

What would that look like? Well for one thing, it would look like the dinner table in Levi's house.

Jesus shouldn't even have been there for starters. In the Roman Empire, the function of tax collecting was sold to brokers, men of wealth and power. In turn they hired district collectors. The way the system was maintained was the provision that the local tax collector could set rates unilaterally and collect whatever the traffic would bear, a system almost designed to be abused. Levi was despised for working for the enemy and athed for living off the tragedy of his neighbors. He is, the way Mark tells it, the fifth person Jesus called to follow — a peculiar choice, one guaranteed to raise eyebrows and to enrage the leaders of the community. And then Levi has the audacity to host a dinner party and invite the sinners, the poor people, the ones who are too busy trying to figure out where the next meal was coming from to bother with keeping a kosher kitchen. If we would do something like that says Professor Crossan, answer the door some evening and instead of giving a Chicago Shares chit to the homeless person, invite him in and introduce him all around and seat him at the dinner party we were enjoying, the result would be a social nightmare.

Jesus was not simply being nice to poor people and disenfranchised people. He was giving them something they really didn't have, namely hope; a sense that there is a way to live in the world that is radically different. It is God's way — God's Kingdom — and he was radically challenging his own society's structures and values. The reasons tax collectors and sinners were so despised were religious reasons. They had violated religious rules and taboos. The irony which Jesus was exposing by his behavior was religion standing in the way of God's will, God's Kingdom. He gave the poor people hope. He made the religious, political and social establishment very angry. He said that the structures of exclusion by which they kept the poor out and affirmed the importance of the privileged were not valid in God's Kingdom. It got him crucified.

Our society's structures of exclusion are more often racial and economic. There's a wonderful new book, *Having Our Say*, by Sadie Delaney, who is 103, and her younger sister Bessie who is 101. Daughters of the first African American Episcopal Bishop, their life and experiences span this century and they tell their story — have their say — with grace and humor. Sadie was a teacher, Bessie a dentist. They lived together always and till do.

Sadie recalls that when her Papa became a bishop in 1918, people were mighty impressed.

> "His accomplishment was so extraordinary, I still wonder how he did it. One time, not long after Papa was consecrated to the bishopric, he did a service at Christ Church in Raleigh. It was a white, segregated church. Our family attended and you know what happened? We had to sit in the balcony, built for slaves. And we were not given the privilege of communion. Oooh, that made Bessie mad. At the time she wanted to make a fuss, but she did not because she did not want to embarrass Papa." [p. 116]

On the topic of discrimination, Bessie says:

> "All I ever wanted in my life was to be treated as an individual. I have succeeded, to some extent. At least I'm sure that in the Lord's eyes I am an individual. I am not a 'colored' person or a 'Negro' person, in God's eyes I'm just me."

And then speaking as a person who for 100 years has lived in a society that has never come fully to grips with its racism — she observes, with utter truth:

> "The Lord won't hold it against me that I am colored because he made me that way! He thinks I am beautiful! And so do I, even with all my wrinkles." [p. 129-130]

> "All I ever wanted was to be treated as an individual."

It's true for all of us — for those tax collectors and sinners, 101-year-old Bessie Delaney, for you and me and everybody in between. What we want and need more than anything else is some sense that we are accepted, welcomed, needed, wanted — by someone, by our neighbors, our families, our spouses, our lovers — and beneath it all accepted, wanted, theologically — by the one who created us.

That's what was going on at Levi's table — the revolutionary reality of God's love, the stunning reality of God's Kingdom.

When they complained about him dining with the wrong crowd, Mark remembers that he said, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick: I have come to call not the righteous but the sinners." No one, of course, has said anything about illness, unless social prejudice and social isolation are a kind of illness which afflicts both its victims and its perpetrators. And that being the case, isn't it interesting that Jesus' behavior — the physician's prescription — is not a scathing denunciation of the prejudice of the privileged, but rather a meal, healing, restoration, reconciliation in the act of eating and drinking together.

An article in the paper last week headlined "Quake Brings Down Villas, And Neighborhood Emerges," and told the story of a residential block in the epicenter of the Los Angeles earthquake: $500,000 homes, swimming pools, walls and lots of privacy: the American dream — affluence and privacy. No one knew anyone on the block beyond the perfunctory nod of the head. Things are different now.

> "The common experience of the earthquake has swept away the need for security and privacy and, at least for now, the block is a community. With their water supply cut off, Lolita and Henry Frederick have hooked a hose into the Marx's house next door. The Marx's have water but no gas, so when Paul Marx, a retired chemist, turned 65 days after the earthquake, Mrs. Frederick baked a banana nut cake and invited the Marx's over for a surprise party. They had never broken bread together before."

When they asked, "Why does he eat with tax collectors?" and he answered, "Those who are well have no need of a physician," there is no way of knowing what the tone was. But I don't hear anger. There is no way of knowing, of course, but I sense sadness in his voice because the scribes, the leaders, the good people, the ones he called righteous, needed acceptance and affirmation and love every bit as much as the poor people, the outcasts — sadness because their religion was the reason they couldn't experience God's amazing, inclusive love.

Where are you? Are you at the table with Jesus? Are you standing outside because his love is too inclusive, so big and bold that it challenges you and takes your breath away? Do you have trouble comprehending a love big enough to include them?

Or is it that you can't understand a love big enough to include you?

Wherever you are — privileged or poor, insider or outsider, righteous or sinner — it doesn't matter. The invitation is to come; to pull up a chair and sit down with brothers and sisters and partake together in this new reality, this Kingdom of God, this bread for our hunger and wine for our deepest thirst.

Amen.